

Be Ready Always

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The Christian life is a race. Therefore, we must be ready because we are called to run and win. Our role is not that of a spectator or a grandstand celebrity. Our role is that of an athlete. Every Christian must run to win. In this race, the winner is not the one who reaches the finishing line first but the one who finishes the race.

Paul uses this analogy of the race in Philippians 3:12-16. He says:

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But, one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.”

Paul lived as one who was running in a race. He continued running even when things became tough for him. His finishing line was conforming to the image of Christ. He focused his energies to attain his crown. He did not spend his energies boxing the air. He said, *“therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air”* (1 Corinthians 9:26). Paul ran with a single-minded purpose – to qualify for the prize awaiting him at the finishing line. And, he exhorts us to do the same.

There are some definite rules or guidelines to follow from Paul's example in Philippians 3:12-16. They will certainly help us to be ready always for the race we are called to run and win.

Running For the Crown

1. Hunger for more of Christ

Paul was a giant in the Kingdom of Christ, yet he knew he was unworthy of his Master. He knew he was not perfect. In Philippians 3:12, he says, *“not, that I ... have already been made perfect,”* for he knew he was being called for something better – something the Lord Himself had taken hold of him for. And he disciplined himself for the higher purpose for which Christ had taken hold of him. In the face of God's lofty purposes, Paul always felt inadequate, “poor in spirit,” and that there was room for improvement. So, he strained to be more and more like Christ, striving to conform to the image of Christ.

Matthew 5:3, 6 say, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”* In verse 3, *“poor in spirit”* refers to a state of hungering after God. It is those who have room for God and seek after Him that God blesses. He will give them the power they need to run the race.

Christians should not come to a place where they will say: “We can retire now. We've attended enough services and acquired enough knowledge.” That is a sure sign that their relationship with our Lord had begun to stagnate. They will never be able to finish the race.

We become satisfied in our pursuit, when we compare ourselves with other people. We will begin to say, "I am better than so and so." That is an invalid measure of growth. Our measure is not our neighbour but Jesus. Again, Paul sets an example. There was much Paul could credit himself for. He was a "Pharisee of the Pharisees", a highly educated man, an accomplished man, a spiritual leader, a winner of souls, a miracle worker, a confidante of Christ about the secret things of God, yet he said that God put a thorn in his flesh that kept him from self-exaltation (2 Corinthians 12:7).

We also become complacent about our growth when we have a false estimate of our spiritual condition and do not turn to Him. The church in Laodicea was very content with itself, claiming to be wealthy and not needing a thing (Revelation 3:17), but our Lord said: "*But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.*" He threatened to spit them out of His mouth! Samson thought that he still had the strength, even after he revealed the source to the manipulating Delilah. What a discovery it was when he found out that it was gone! Subsequently, he was taken as a prisoner by his enemies (Judges 16:20).

2. Be committed to the one thing

The key to being a winner is to be single-minded about that one supreme goal – to be like Jesus. In Philippians 3:14, Paul says "*I press on toward that goal...*" it is this "one thing" that we must set our eyes on and strive after.

It was this "one thing" that the rich young ruler could not do when he asked Jesus what he must do to inherit the kingdom of God. And, so, Jesus said in Mark 10:21: "*Jesus looked at him and loved him, 'One thing you lack,' he said, 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'*"

That "one thing" – to follow Christ and do all that He commands – that rich young man could not do and he went away sadly. Jesus also tells Martha in Luke 10:42: "*but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*"

Mary chose to sit at the Lord's feet and listen to Him. In Psalm 27:4, the writer reaches out to God: "*One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.*"

Therefore, Christians must have that single-minded determination to press onwards for "this one thing" – to be like Christ.

The Christian running the race looks towards the future. In Philippians 3:13, the word "forgetting" does not mean "fail to remember." Apart from senility, hypnosis or a brain malfunction, no mature person can forget what has happened in the past. "Forgetting" in the Bible means "no longer to be influenced by or affected by."

When God says, "*Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more*" (Hebrews 10:17), He is not suggesting that He will conveniently forget. What God is saying is: "I will no longer hold your sins against you". Your sins can no longer affect your standing with God or influence God's attitude toward us.

"*Forgetting those things which are behind*" does not suggest an impossible feat of mental gymnastics to erase the sins and mistakes of the past. It simply means that we break the power of the past by living for the future. There were things in Paul's past that could have been weights to hold him back but they lack power to do so. The past could not be changed

but his understanding of them changed. Let go of the hold the past has on you and look ahead to the future you can have in Christ.

We can be ready always by getting into the race and determining to win! The same zeal that Paul employed when he persecuted the church (Philippians 3:6), he displayed in serving Christ.

Christians must realise that God must work in us if we are to win the race. *“Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me have really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ”* (Philippians 1:12-13). *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5). God works in us that He might work through us. God enables us to be ready to run the race and we become strong and mature to win the crown.

It is not enough to run fast to win the race. The runner must also obey the rules. In Philippians 3:16 Paul emphasises the importance of living “up to what we have already attained.” We have found the truth in Christ. The truth now becomes our guide to do what is right and pleasing to God. God has given us His Word so that we can run the race the way it should be run. This is what Paul has in mind in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize”.

If the athlete breaks the rules of the game, he is disqualified. *“Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules”* (2 Timothy 2:5). The issue is not what he thinks or what the spectators think but what the judges say. One day each Christian will stand before the judgement seat of Christ. If we discipline ourselves to obey the rules, we shall receive a prize.

Many began the Christian race with great success but failed at the end because they disregarded God’s rules. And it can happen to us! It is an exciting experience to run the race daily, *“Looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith”* (Hebrews 12:2). It will be even more exciting when we experience that “upward calling” and Jesus returns to take us to heaven! Then, we will stand before Him to receive our rewards! It was this future prospect that motivated Paul and it can also motivate us. Be Ready Always!

(All the Bible quotations are from the New International Version).